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AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION.

MOSES COIT TYLER.

A MEMORIAL ADDRESS

BY

GEORGE L. BURR,
PROFESSOR, CORNELL UNIVERSITY.

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MOSES COIT TYLER.

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The first year of a new century has rolled away since together at the University of Michigan we listened to the tidings that Moses Coit Tyler was gone. Then already, in words than which none could be more tender and adequate, our grief was given utterance by his old friend and leader who announced to us his death.^a You yourselves in formal resolution paid reverent tribute to his worth; and the snows of another winter now lie deep on the palm wreath which you laid upon his grave.

And yet—let us not turn from that quiet grave on the hill-crest without some effort to set down in more deliberate words the meaning of his life. I shall not claim for it many minutes of this busy session. Since pledging myself to this task I have also undertaken, at the wish of his family, to compile that more elaborate memorial which we hoped from a member of his own household; and much which I might else have wished to put on record here may better wait for that. I hope you will not count it amiss if here and now I take occasion to ask your help in this my larger enterprise. Some of you have known him longer than I; a few perhaps even better. Will you not help me by any suggestion which can make that memorial more worthy; and, above all, by the sharing of anything of his own, written or spoken, which might else escape my knowledge? The matter is not pressing, for his rich journals and correspondence, out of which, I trust, the story will mainly be woven, are by his will left under seal till at least five years are gone; yet I should be glad before that, and the sooner the better, to work up all I can find outside.

I but mention now, in passing, the episodes of his simple life—his New England birth, at Griswold, in eastern Connecticut, on a summer day of 1835; his migratory childhood,

^a President Angell.

sojourning with his parents, now in central New York, now at one or another village of southern Michigan, till, in the middle forties, they brought up at Detroit; his school days there and his college years at Ann Arbor and at Yale; the seminary days at New Haven and Andover; his brief career (1859-1862) as a Congregational pastor at Owego, on the Susquehanna, and Poughkeepsie, on the Hudson; the breaking health and broadening views which drove him from the ministry, and the fresh, new life of out-of-doors and exercise, with the revelation of "muscular Christianity" which it brought; his mission to England, at the instance of Dr. Dio Lewis, to preach this new gospel of health; his fruitful stay there (1863-1866) as lecturer and writer, and the new life of the pen which opened for him through his correspondence with American journals; his home-coming and his career upon the lecture platform; the call to a professorship of literature at the University of Michigan, and the long years of service there (1867-1881) broken only by his editorial year in charge of the *Christian Union* (1873-74) during the famous trial of Mr. Beecher; the long home stretch of twenty years (1881-1900) as professor of American history at Cornell.

Let me rather ask, with you, What has it all been worth to us, this life of toil with voice and pen? Of the former, his work as public lecturer and as teacher—though it was on the platform I first saw and began to love him, and though for years I have been his colleague and an observer of his methods—I hesitate as yet to speak. Our common fellow-teacher, Professor Jenks, who was his pupil at the University of Michigan, has in a capital sketch put on record his own memories.^a "Few students," he writes, "who had the good fortune to elect work with him * * * will ever forget his courteous manner, his exquisite diction, his keen appreciation of literary style, his gift of humorous critical comment. * * * His students felt that he required exactness and finish in their work, and all shrank from the silent reproof of his manner when slovenly, inaccurate work was presented. Precision, accuracy, truth, he demanded from himself, and he expected them, so far as immaturity would permit it, from his students." * * * Yet, "while he might be rigid in his just demands for faithfulness, he was no less appreciative

^a In *The Michigan Alumnus*, March, 1901.

and generous in his recognition of good work faithfully done. Many a student can recall a word of praise, discriminatingly given, which he has felt as a stimulus for many years thereafter."

Of the published fruits of his pen the tale is not long. Besides an early booklet or two on physical culture^a and those old letters from across the sea, a few of which were not long ago gathered into a volume as *Glimpses of England*,^b together with one or two tasks which, like his revision of Morley's *English Literature*^c or his little memorial of Edgar Apgar,^d were mere incidents to his life as teacher or as citizen, his life work as a writer sums itself up almost wholly in his history of American literature. That the volumes devoted to the colonial period busied him during almost the whole of his stay at Michigan,^e and that it was not till near the end of his long career at Cornell that there appeared those on the literary history of the Revolution,^f anticipated slightly by the little volume on Berkeley, Dwight, and Barlow,^g which is but a detached part of the same great work, I can hardly need to tell you. More novel, doubtless, might be what I could tell of the cost of the work to its author—of the endless pains-taking, the relentless thoroughness, the exacting fastidiousness; or of the devotion and the system which alone made it possible, in spite of academic interruptions and never too certain health, to accomplish so much—of the house-top study and the unbroken morning hours (close friend though I have been, I confess to never having disturbed him in the morning and to having entered the study only since his death), of the classification, topical and alphabetic, minute to a degree which would make most of you smile.

But "the proof of the pudding is in the eating," and we may perhaps better ask, now that the years have begun to test the outcome, whether all this zeal may not have failed of its mark, or perhaps have overshot it. On such a point my studies have given me small right to pronounce; but happily one whose competence none will question, a student like him-

^a Notably his *Brawnville Papers*, Boston, 1869.

^b *Glimpses of England*, Social, Political, Literary. New York, 1898.

^c New York, 1879.

^d *In Memoriam: Edgar Kelsey Apgar*, Ithaca, 1886.

^e They were published in 1878.

^f New York, 1897.

^g *Three Men of Letters*, New York, 1895.

self of both our literature and our history, Professor Trent, has lately weighed it for us in a study notable alike for its charm and for its keen though sympathetic insight.^a To the industry and learning of Professor Tyler he gives unstinted praise. He notes, indeed, as others have done, the startling generosity with which the historian of American literature welcomes to his pages unknown names and his enthusiasm for much that hardly passes mediocrity; but he admits that where he came to scoff he has more than once remained to pray, and is fain at last to find the chief value of the masterpiece in precisely this abounding sympathy and this scholarly inclusiveness. He does not fail, indeed, to see what he deems more real faults—a certain over-elaboration, a sometimes irritating facetiousness, a tendency to lapse into that half-playful, half-pretentious trifling which his own generation, once so prone to it, called “lucubration;” yet these he counts but petty flaws in the “true man and admirable writer” whose clear and readable style, whose acumen, whose sound canons of esthetic criticism, whose tastes, “sturdy and healthy, yet by no means lacking in delicacy,” whose wide culture and thorough independence, he eloquently sets forth. Surely such achievement was worth even such effort.

In the *American Literature*, I said, his work as a writer sums itself almost wholly up. Yet not quite. We have at least the Patrick Henry^b to show us with how subtle and how sure a pen he could deal with political history as well, and to deepen our grief at the loss of that biographical history of American statesmanship in the nineteenth century on which he was busy when death came. It must have been far advanced; for, on my last tramp with him, a fortnight or so before the final illness, he told me with gusto of sundry things he had learned while at work upon the Sumner, and I certainly gathered that this study, with earlier ones, was at least provisionally complete. It was characteristic of the man that before his going he saw to it himself that all such papers were destroyed. Of this book (as of those further chapters of the *American Literature*, for which some have hoped) nought will ever see the light. A single article, seemingly left in readiness for the press, may be sent to the printer; but that is all.

Yet let me not limit to this lost book and to his Patrick Henry

^a In *The Forum*, August, 1901.

^b New York, 1887. (*American Statesmen series.*)

his work as a historian. Not less than these the American Literature is history—the history not of an art but of a society. Not only is it everywhere suffused with a clear consciousness of the social and institutional life underlying American thought and letters, and radiant with many a flash of insight into this world of affairs, but it is itself a study not of style but of life. Even to Professor Trent the main impression left by it, and that which its author wished to leave, is of democracy's part in American life and culture. To Moses Coit Tyler history was not past politics more than past literature: either had for him interest and worth only as key to that life and growth of which each is but an utterance. Before he began his story of our literature he had planned, as he told me, to write a history of the American people. What he did write was but a part of it.

To a free people—like our own and that of our free motherland across the sea—it is but natural to exalt into the foremost place the rôle of the citizen and that history which seems to fit him most directly for his tasks; and justly has been pointed out the worth to him who writes it of some personal share in politics or government. Yet, after all, that with which politics has to do is the form of life, not its substance. To him who will sound that deeper current which is history's best theme no sympathetic touch with life but has its worth; and much conspired to fit Moses Coit Tyler for his work. His Eastern birth and Western rearing, the Puritan traditions and convictions which shaped his earlier life, and the humanizing studies, the wider acquaintance, the freer air of the lecture field and of travel which gave breadth and color to his later, his experiences as a Congregational pastor and the widely differing environment whose influence long after ripened in his entrance as deacon and as priest into the Episcopal clergy, all these, aye, even the accident of name which cousined him to the Virginia Tylers, had their share in the making of that historian whose catholic sympathy was sensitive to every hopeful stirring of purpose or of taste in saint or sinner, Whig or Tory, Calvinist or Anglican, Yankee or Southron—who could without suspicion of prepossession or of malice reveal to us the numbers, the worth, the sound thinking, and the lofty aims of the American Loyalists or lay bare the mixture of character and of motive in the Fathers of the Republic.

Yet, at the heart of all, the measure of the historian is the man. Insight is less the daughter of experience than of sympathy. There is no royal school for the study of human nature. Even those circumstances which did so much for the training of Moses Coit Tyler were less his fate than his choice. To know the real secret of his work one must know himself.

But it is no less true that the writer mirrors himself in his work. And if this be so, as men long have held, in that self-expression which is literature, doubly is it so in that interpretation of others which is history. No matter how thorough the historian's research, how searching and conscientious his criticism, how scrupulously objective his narration, none the less surely he reveals himself. To divine a Shakespeare from a Hamlet or a Prince Hal is not easy; but it is because we can not know the ideal after which he shaped them. The historian's drama must be real: true not to life only, but to life that has been lived; true in all its proportions and perspective; true to feeling, to motive, to character, to all the complex reality of life. Against that background of reality, shadowed in outline by the very light he bears, the historian stands himself revealed: revealed by the choice and limits of his theme, revealed by the selection and the testing of his materials, revealed by his conception of men and of events, revealed by the tone and temper of his treatment—seeing no more than he can grow in him the self to see and telling no more than self impels him to share—revealed by all he does, revealed yet more by all he fails to do. So much of himself the historian must give. If he will, he may well give more—something of the joy of his work, something of the cheer of sharing it, something of the love of men it kindles, something of that self-revelation which is the soul of companionship—a warmth which is not passion and a color which is not prejudice, but the very glow of health on the living face of truth.

If I am content for now to forego the tempting effort to describe you the man Moses Coit Tyler as it was mine to know him, it is because in both these ways, as have few others, he has revealed himself in his books. Few have so toiled to make their every phrase the perfect expression of truth and of themselves. In his pages as clearly as in personal acquaintance you may know that singular union of

austerity and boyishness, that exuberance of humor, that whimsical playfulness of fancy, that love of companionship, that fertility in anecdote, that unjaded interest in everything human under the sun, that glee in out-of-doors which to the very end made him in the open the most boisterous of us all and won from the staring farmers the answering shout of "Go it, boys!"—aye, and that devout and reverent inner self, that loftiness of soul, that refinement of taste, that dignity and serenity of temper, that irony the keener for its kindliness, which to us who knew him best made up the personality of "the knight of the sunny countenance." All is there for you in his books—quality and defect, nay, even his very quirks and foibles. And, balancing them all together, I doubt if the closest of us could find saner verdict than that of Professor Trent, who never saw him in the flesh—"true man and admirable writer."

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